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SUSANNE GIESECKE

“Goethehof”

A guided tour to a landmark of social innovation of the Red Vienna period

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GIESECKE, SUSANNE, Austrian Institute of Technology (AIT)

Goethehof. A guided tour to a landmark of social innovation of the Red Vienna period



Old b/w picture of the Goethehof © WStLA, Fotos des Presse- und Informationsdienstes, FC1: 5005/1

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Linke Wienzeile 246
A – 1150 Vienna

Tel. +43-1-4950442 Fax. +43-1-4050442-40
e-mail: institut@zsi.at
www.zsi.at

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Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction.....	5
1 History of social housing and context.....	5
2 The tenant situation after World War I	7
3 Goethehof – architecture	7
4 Architects.....	10
5 Art school and tradition.....	10
6 Art in the Goethehof.....	11
7 February 1934 Uprising	12
8 Social Democratic tradition	13
9 The library.....	14
10 Social stratification, tenants and politics today.....	15
11 Housing complexes in the neighborhood	17
12 Rents	17
13 Refurbishments.....	18
References	19

Abstract

Enormous architectural and construction efforts were mobilized during the inter-war period of 1919 and 1934 in the city of Vienna to realize more than 380 huge building complexes and fight massive homelessness that had put the city into misery. The working paper describes a tour around one of the landmarks of that time, the Goethehof in the 22nd district, which offered shelter in more than 700 modern high quality homes, including technological innovations such as running water and gas pipes in every kitchen, a toilet and all rooms enjoying day light and fresh air; but also social innovations such as the community housing itself, offering a kindergarten and a library inside the building complex. The Goethehof is also a symbol for the ongoing social and political divide of that time between the Austro-Marxists, the conservative patriarchal Catholics and the Austro-fascists. The polarisation culminated in the uprising of February 1934 – and the Goethehof as one of the last bastions of the workers' movement was partly destroyed, its defenders killed or arrested. Today the Goethehof stands for continuous unitary social housing policy not only in the city of Vienna but in the whole country, and a policy that uses social housing as a macro-economic tool to provide long-term social security, stability and cohesion.



Streetview of the Goethehof ©J. Lodemann 2015

Introduction

The context of this article is a case study of the development of social housing in the city of Vienna from 1919 to the present, covering about 100 years until now. Social housing was chosen as study object for the EU funded CRESSI project¹. To give an example of the social housing policies and activities in the early phase of the 20th century, a guided visit to the Goethehof gave visitors and participants of the “Social Innovation 2015” conference the chance to get to know one of the landmarks of this period. The Goethehof was built during the 1930s and is a landmark of social housing policies during the Red Vienna period.

Social housing in Vienna serves as a case for exploring the development of a social innovation coping with severe shortage of housing one hundred years ago and the precarious situation of homeless people and families at that time. Interestingly, this housing policy has continued, even though with interruptions and in different ways until today. Housing policy in Vienna reflect the Austrian model of unitary social housing measures to provide affordable housing not only for the very poor but for major parts of the middle class, thereby keeping social peace and avoiding urban ghettos.

1 History of social housing and context

All the social housing complexes established in Vienna between 1921 and 1933 show the inscription: “Built during the years after 1920, by means of the building taxes.”

The Goethehof is one out of 348 social housing complexes the Vienna’s social democratic government set up in only 12 years; that is between 1922 and 1933. They are called superblocs. Altogether, they hosted more than 60,000 dwellings.

Why was there such a massive housing project?

The city reacted to the massive homelessness problems that dominated the city of Vienna already in the years before WWI, but even more so after 1919.

Population figures in Vienna had continued to rise rapidly, not only as a result of the incorporations of neighboring countries, but also as a result of the massive influx into the capital of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. By 1910 the city reached the highest figure in its history, with 2,031,000. By comparison, London boasted 7.25 million by 1910, Paris 2.85 million and Berlin 2.07 million.

Already before 1918, during the Wilhelminian era, about 300,000 people were homeless. During those times, the living situation for the working class was one of the worst in Europe. Thus it is no surprise that many tenants were suffering from infectious diseases such as lung diseases and tuberculosis – also called the Vienna disease.

¹ <http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/faculty-research/research-projects/cressi>



Typical inscription pointing out that the complex was built by the city of Vienna @J. Lodemann 2015

Vienna was cut off from its former agrarian and resource hinterland and had also lost its traditional sales markets, namely Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary and Galicia. As a consequence, the food supply situation became very severe and homelessness after 1919 increased. (WEBER 1981: 593-595)

A turnaround was made possible by a constitutional change which had been discussed for more than 50 years already and which laid the ground for the first municipal election in Vienna. At the beginning of the 1920s Vienna as a city and municipal entity obtained a federal state status of its own and became independent from the federal state of Lower Austria.

Vienna's social democratic local government after WWI created a local welfare state, whose aim was to promote better housing and living conditions as well as better health and education for working-class people. Among the various programs developed in the Red Vienna period, the construction of municipal housing was the most ambitious and most prestigious undertaking. The Vienna municipality played a key role as both developer and owner. Social housing was built throughout the city and thus had a long-term anti-segregation effect.

On 21 September 1923, a few weeks before general parliamentary elections, the Social Democrats announced the municipality's plan to build 25,000 housing units over the next five years. Thus, the period of the superblocks started. This plan was linked to efforts to curb unemployment in Vienna. It was intended to provide jobs for thousands of construction workers, craftsmen, sculptors, and architects. The new housing program, as it was announced, was to contribute significantly to the beautification of the city. The estimated budget for the building program was 400 million crowns per year (approx. \$5,700,000 in 1923), which was to be paid out of a newly implemented tax, the housing construction tax (CZEIKE, 1959: 53).

2 The tenant situation after World War I

A proletarian family at that time was constantly on the move: from one shelter to another, almost without any rights of belonging.

The traditional tenant dwellings the working class occupied at that time had only a kitchen to live in, sometimes one additional room. A typical feature of the period was the flat whose kitchen was directly entered from the corridor. It had neither a water tap of its own nor a bathroom or toilet. Running water had to be fetched from the communal tap in the corridor outside the flat, the so-called 'Bassena', from Italian 'bacino'. The often exorbitant rents gave rise to another social phenomenon, that of the 'Bettgeher'. The tenants of a flat sublet some beds for the night/day to people who were unable to afford a flat of their own.

Usually, they had no direct light but faced an air shaft and the living space was not more than 20 square meters. Still by 1917, 95% of the worker's dwellings had no running water inside. The rent was so high that it cost a quarter of an average worker's salary.

3 Goethehof – architecture

The heavy iron gates at the main entrance (Schüttaustraße) underline the fortified and defensive character of this complex. They symbolize a clear division between life inside and outside of the building.

The main gate of the Goethehof is huge and simple. It is set a bit to the back so that it forms some kind of square together with six old oaks in the front. The metal gate gives the impression of a fortress like building.

Facing the Old Danube you can see two concave lateral blocks limiting the complex. The rest is shaped like a frame, almost octagonal (see floor plan).



Floor plan of the Goethehof ©J. Lodemann 2015

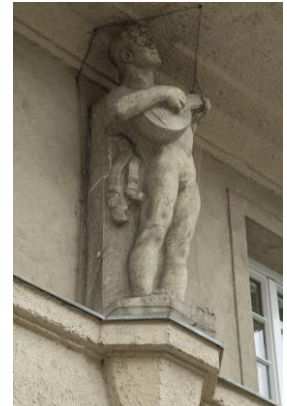
The building consists of three stories and is thus rather flat. But the sheer size of it makes it a huge and impressive building. Some people feel reminded of a huge flagship stranded on a sandbank. Or of a spaceship. The building represents strength and entity. The floor plan resembles that of the Schönbrunn castle.

The style of this architecture can be called functional and unpretentious; yet some elements are characterized from being romantic to expressive (WINTERER 2014).

"The Musician"
reflects the romantic
tradition

of the architectural
school

@J. Lodemann 2015



At the time when it was built it must have been even more impressive because there were almost no other building complexes here. Only illegal shanty-town settlements existed on spaces where we today have the UN buildings. As many other historic social housing projects this one is under protection (STROUHAL 2010).



Illegal shanty town
settlement during the
1920s next to the
Goethehof

@ÖNB Archive

Inside the complex there are three courtyards. The undulated promenades and 50 staircases are connecting the different buildings. There were 727 apartments originally. Over the years several renovations and refurbishment went on and some apartments were combined so that today we have 677 (STROUHAL 2010).



Goethehof from the top, Kaiserwasser to the left, Marshall Hof to the right ©J. Lodemann 2015

4 Architects

The Goethehof was built between 1930 and 1931 by six architects and this is one reason why we find different styles in this building complex. Three of them were master students of the prestigious Otto Wagner; one was a scholar of Peter Behrens and one was a scholar of Heinrich Tessenow.

Usually they worked in partnerships of two and each duo designed different buildings and elements. The list bellows gives an overview on the six architects and some of their other social housing projects (and the districts), most were built during the Red Vienna period.

Hugo Mayer, (1883-1930) built also the settlements „Siedlung Schmelz“ (Vienna 15) and „Rosenhügel“ (Vienna 12) 1919

Rudolf Fraß, (1880-1934), master scholar of Otto Wagner, accomplished three superblocs in Vienna

Viktor Mittag, (1896-1962), scholar of Heinrich Tessenow (Kunstgewerbeschule) und Josef Hoffmann; built also the „John F. Kennedy-Hof“, Rotenturmstraße (Vienna 1) 1960-66, „Friedrich-Ebert-Hof“ (Vienna 15) 1925-1926, „Thury-Hof“ (Vienna 9) 1925-1926, „Wildgans-Hof“ (Vienna 3) 1933

Karl Hauschka, (1896-1981), scholar of Peter Behrens (Akademie der bildenden Künste Vienna), won several prizes. In cooperation with Viktor Mittag several housing projects for the Red Vienna Wildganshof, in the 1960s Harry-S.-Truman-Hof (Vienna 23), Thury-Hof, Friedrich-Ebert-Hof, housing complex at Schüttelstraße 19 (Vienna 2) in 1950, housing complex at Heiligenstädter Straße 165 (Vienna 19) 1952, housing complex at Ruckergasse 54–60 (Vienna 12), 1953–1954; worked also in Madrid and Berlin

Heinrich Schopper, (1896-1981) master scholar of Otto Wagner, „Gall-Hof“ (Vienna 9,) Engelsberggasse 3 (Vienna 3), „Hueber-Hof“ (Vienna 10) 1930

Alfred Chalousch (1883-1957), master scholar of Otto Wagner: „Gall-Hof“ (Wien 9) 1924, housing complex at Engelsberggasse (Vienna 3) 1926, „Hueber-Hof“ (Vienna 10) 1930, housing complex at Wehlistraße (Vienna 20) 1950

Johann Rothmüller (1882-1965), housing complex at Hagenmüllergasse 32 (Vienna 3) 1927–1928

5 Art school and tradition

The more than 348 social housing complexes built during the twelve years were designed and constructed by more than 200 architects, 30 of which were master scholars of Otto Wagner. Only two of them were women, one of them Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky.

Otto Wagner died shortly before this construction era began but he had actually a lot of influence on the future development of Vienna. He had the vision of a master plan with huge and widespread buildings, also for the working class. His idea of big courtyards imitating the traditional cloister and palace architecture was taken up by his scholars and realized in the early social housing projects (STROUHAL 2010; HEITMEYER 2010; WEIHSMANN 2008; RAML 2007).

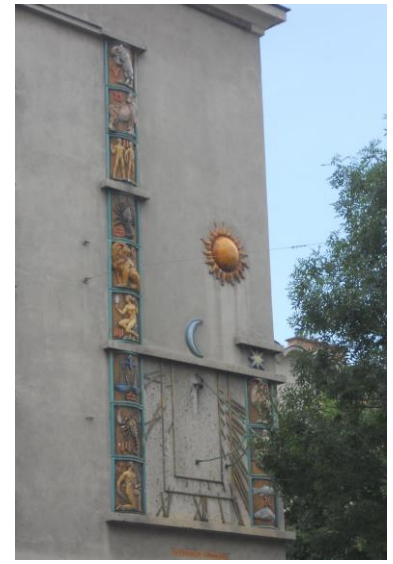
6 Art in the Goethehof

The Goethehof hosted the first Montessori kindergarten in Vienna. Already after the building was finished the kindergarten moved in. The interior design and also the furniture were created according to the philosophy of Montessori's pedagogy (ACHLEITNER 2010).



The kindergarten

©J. Lodemann 2015



Sundial by Alfred Chalousch and
Oskar Thiede

©C. Mosch 2014

The kindergarten was the first public one in Vienna run according to the reformist Montessori principles. Its exterior and interior were designed by Franz Singer and Friedl (Friederike) Dicker², the only Bauhaus scholars in Austria at that time. During the February fights parts of it were already destroyed in 1934. The rest was destroyed by governmental order in 1938. The modern approach of Montessori were interpreted as a threat to the Austro fascists, thus the kindergarten teachers of that school either migrated or were killed.

Architects did not only design buildings but also all the details, even art. The sundial with zodiac signs (allegorical fries made of colored glazed ceramics) was created by Alfred Chalousch, one of the Goethehof architects, and the sculpturer Oskar Thiede (fassade Schüttaustraße 39) (BUNDESDENKMALAMT 1996).

The stone sculpture near the kindergarten symbolizes the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and was created by Hans Vohburger (inside the courtyard). At the main entrance there are three figures: two musicians and a dancer. These are original and remind of the romantic tradition. Also the bronze plaque on the eternal harvest by Joseph Humplink is from the times the complex was built. Later, in 1984, a remembrance plaque was integrated, in memory of those who lost their lives during February 1934 (main entrance) (WOHN SERVICE WIEN 2014, WEIHSMANN 1985, MÜHLBAUER 1985).

² Friedl Singer was arrested 1934 in connection with the uprising; later (1942) again, by the Nazis, and killed in Auschwitz, her colleague Franz Singer migrated (1938) to England.

7 February 1934 Uprising

On February 14, 1934 grenades and machine gun volleys hit the forefront of the housing complex. The library and some of the apartments were destroyed, the tenants evacuated. In Vienna, a civil war took place.

Some 30 members of the already forbidden Republican Defense League and of the Communist Party barricaded themselves in the middle part of the housing complex. The situation seemed already hopeless. The military superiority of the executive and the Heimwehr (a right-wing para-military organization) was overwhelming. Finally, the last bastion of the working class laid down their arms. This incident symbolizes the fight between the para-military forces that had already started in 1923. It escalated in 1933 when Christian Social Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß suspended the Austrian parliament. As a consequence, the social democratic party lost their major platform for political action and the conservatives (Social Christians) reacted to the pressure and violence not only from the left but also from the Nazis. After the suspension, the ruling party could act on the basis of the 1917 emergency law, without any checks and balances. They curbed civil liberties. The Republican Defense League did not want to accept this without resistance and in Vienna, their members barricaded themselves in some of the social housing complexes. Police and right-wing para-military forces took position outside the complexes and fired heavily. The army joined them with artillery, thus forcing the socialist fighters to surrender. Several hundred people died all over Austria, more than a thousand were wounded, 1,500 fighters and supporters arrested, some later executed, other had to flee to exile. (SCHAFRANEK 1984).



Destruction during the uprising © Austrian Resistance Documentary Archive

Only four years after its completion, the Goethehof was partly destroyed (WINTERER 2014) and the social democratic party forbidden.



Memorial plaque and wreath to honor the dead and wounded victims of the uprising

©S. Giesecke 2015

The documentary “Tränen statt Gewehre” (tears instead of guns) by Karin Berger (1983) tell the story of Anni Haider who fought for the workers’ militia and took a machine gun to shield the withdrawal of the fleeing workers. Wounded and wanted by the police she took shelter in the food plain in the shanty town, now the UN premises.³

To better understand the disruption of the Red Vienna period let us turn to the social democratic context and its meaning for that time in the next section.

8 Social Democratic tradition

Already prior to 1914 the Vienna social-democrats demanded the construction of municipal housing but failed due to the resistance and dominance of the Christian-social municipal government. (WIENER WOHNEN 2015)

In 1913, the elections on the basis of curia suffrage made Jakob Reumann the first social-democratic mayor of Vienna (until 1923). The austro-marxism practiced at that time does not only comprise social housing and with it municipal schools, improvement of hygiene but an emancipatory undertaking including a cultural mass movement and a new lifestyle, a shared notion of “belonging” for the working class and for the marginalized (REINPRECHT 2012: 209).

³ „Tränen statt Gewehre. Anni Haider erzählt“. A 1983, 30 min. Directors: Karin Berger, Elisabeth Holzinger, Lotte Podgornik, Lisbeth N. Trallori // Camera, sound: Franz Grafl // Voice: Waltraud Kutschera // Music: Anton Webern

The city of Vienna developed towards an austro-marxist local welfare state, based on a new type of tax policy and innovative social policies in the areas such as health, education and housing. This reformist policy was closely linked with the struggle for cultural and political hegemony. (REINPRECHT 2012: 209).

The superblocs were designed to prepare for a new society. Housing was not defined as just giving shelter, but as a social practice and new form of culture. This emerging social class was to be the antipode to the conservative-reactionary and catholic social policy and their idealisation of family, class and patriotic territorialism. (PIRHOFER & SIEDER 1982: 326)

By the end of this period one out of ten Vienna inhabitants resided in one of the modern social housing blocks. Just as the other superblocs, the Goethehof and its apartments were well equipped and modern. It offered light and affordable living quarters with water supply and toilets in every apartment. This was a luxury at that time!

Even though today many people regard the social housing blocks of the 1920s and 30s as primitive shelters of the social underclass, the superblocs were the architectural symbol of progress and modernity during the inter war period. It was part of the creation of a modern human being. The credo was to give the working class and especially their children a better start and more opportunities.

This is why the superblocs included many of the social features such as libraries, child care, playgrounds, common kitchens, launderettes, public bath, shops, etc. Also to promote exchange and communication among the tenants.

The shootings during February 1934 were a shock for many of the tenants and for some time their community life stood still in the Goethehof. The holes caused by the bullets during the shooting could be seen in the walls of some buildings until the 1970s. The building complex was then remodeled and some of the green spaces inside the courtyard were turned into parking lots. This was the demand of the tenants.

During Labor Day (1st of May) the tenants used to put up the red banner of the labor movement. But this has stopped several years ago. The facilities for the banners have been removed. There used to be an official celebration at the 12th of February every year to remember the fights of 1934 and its victims. This celebration included a wreath-laying ceremony and it took place at the main gate. All that is left these days of this tradition is a symbolic piece of paper hanging at the main gate on February 12 and some flowers to show the new generation that this is actually a historic site (WINTERER 2014).

9 The library

Education was of high importance for the Austrian labour movement, already in the 19th century. This is also reflected by the fact that the German writer and scholar Johann Wolfgang von Goethe served as the namesake of the housing complex.⁴ When social democracy became a mass movement by the turn of the century and the suffrage for men was introduced in 1907, education of the masses had to be intensified. The social democrats established their own library system which reached its peak during World War I. Especially the social housing complexes of the 1920s and 1930s offered a great opportunity to integrate community libraries into the newly created space in an appealing design. They were very well frequented by their users.

⁴ The housing complex was officially opened at Goethe's 100th birthday. In his opening speech mayor Karl Seitz stressed the parallel between the construction of the Goethehof on the backfilled floodplains of the Danube river and the embankment mentioned in Goethe's Faust to reclaim land from the sea.

Some housing complexes even hosted libraries especially for small children. More than one thousand librarians worked in Vienna on a voluntary basis during this period to take part in this mass movement. The worker's library system was supported by communal politics of Vienna and a network of more than 60 worker's libraries was established all over Vienna by 1932. Six of them were located in the new community houses, one being the Goethehof (Schüttaustraße/ Schödlberggasse). The brutal suppression of the social democratic movement in 1934 ended these educational activities abruptly. By 1936 all the libraries were integrated into a communal system; and only after World War II was a new system established by the city of Vienna (EXENBERGER 1968; NÖTSCH/REYER 1989; POSER 1980; STICKLER 1980).



The library ©J. Lodemann 2015

10 Social stratification, tenants and politics today

Two-thirds of Viennese citizens live in municipal or publicly subsidised housing, and eight out of ten flats built in the city today are financed by Vienna's housing subsidy scheme. For many years now, Vienna has been recognised as an international pioneer in publicly subsidised housing construction, the policy of providing supply-side building subsidies allowing more new flats to be built than in other major cities. The city is a front runner when it comes to housing refurbishment: the City of Vienna subsidises the modernisation of some 10,000 flats per annum, while in Munich the figure is only about 1,000. (WIENER WOHNEN 2015)

A proud record

1900: Vienna has over 2 million inhabitants, 300,000 of whom have no home of their own.

1934: One in ten Viennese citizens lives in municipal housing.

2013: One in four Viennese citizens lives in municipal housing.

(WIENER WOHNEN 2015)

Vienna's first municipal housing complexes brought a quantum leap in living standards for their tenants. The upward trend continued uninterrupted from then on – though obviously not always in quite such a spectacular fashion. The average living area in square meters per capita expanded from 22 m² to 38 m² between 1961 and 2001. Nowadays the benchmark standard is 40 m² per capita.

There are still quite a few tenants who grew up in the Goethehof during the inter-war period and live here. Among the elderly people you easily find tenants who have been living here for more than 50 more even 70 years.

Still, there is quite a mixture of people living in this landmark. Most have rather low income. They are blue color workers, supermarket employees, people working in the health services and in child care, and retired people. Many tenants used to belong to the social democratic party or at least sympathized with it. This ideological connection however has dissolved more and more over last decades.

Until the late 1970s they all celebrated Labor Day together and marched to the Prater where there is always a big festivity going on at May 1st.

Even though the clientele has changed over the years, many people still appreciate the low rent and spacious inside of the courtyard with the park-like settings (WINTERER 2014).

Times are changing and memories are fading. New generations move in and also more tenants with a migration background, having no roots in the social democratic and labor movement tradition. One third of the tenants here today have a migration background (WINTERER 2014).

During the last election for the Vienna city council the social democrats lost this voter community to the neo-fascist/populist Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ. There was only a 50% voter turnout in this social housing complex. The same holds true for the election results in the neighboring Marshall building complex (ZÖCHLING 2015).



Entrance to one of the staircases. Each unit has its own caretaker ©S. Giesecke 2015

11 Housing complexes in the neighborhood

Originally the Marshall building complex of the 1950s was built for some really poor people. For those who used to live in illegal shanty town settlements in the area where we have the UNIDO today. At the opening in 1961 the three blocks of the Marshall complex were the most modern of their time. The apartments were bigger than in the Goethehof and they also had a bath – with shower or bathtub – and a balcony. From the more elevated stories the tenants can see the island in the Danube and the kitschy red sunsets.

Only 50 meters apart, for the more well-to-do, we have the cooperative housing complex right next to the river, called Wohnpark Neue Donau. Its architect was a master scholar of famous Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius. His name is Harry Seidler. He emigrated in 1938 and later returned.

Politically, it is still a stronghold of the social democrats and Green Party. These apartments are more expensive than in the other two complexes. In 1999 you had to bring in 35,000€ as a contribution to construction costs. Today these apartments are worth between 300,000€ and 400,000€.

Interestingly, each of the three building complexes has its own child care center. So the little kids do not mix and neither do the adults (ZÖCHLING 2015).

12 Rents

In order to be entitled for an apartment provided by the city, you have to earn not more than 2,952.85 € gross per month for a single household (APA 2012).

In the interwar period the rent for an apartment with two and a half rooms including kitchen and bath was 100 Schilling and an average worker's salary 800 Schilling. Within the same contract, such an apartment today costs 270€, so way below the average on the free housing market (WINTERER 2014).

There is a mixture of tenants who have been living here all their lives and are retired now. Then there are tenants who inherited the cheap lease for the apartments and then there are tenants who moved in more recently and who have to pay higher rents because the prices have gone up. This imbalance creates a lot of discontent of course. Those who inherited the lease pay a lower rent even if they earn more than the limit for moving in here. For poor people getting a new contract the rent is not that cheap after all. They have to pay 7€ per square meter, including utilities and tax, though.

Foreigners usually do not belong to those paying low rents because it was only in 2006 that social housing in Austria was opened for those who do not have Austrian citizenship. The change was implemented to comply with EU regulations.

The city of Vienna does not have an annual evaluation and adjustment of rents according to the wages of the tenants in the social housing complexes because they think it has to be part of the Viennese mixture to have well-to-do people next to low-income earners in the same building. If rents would be adjusted the better off would probably move out very soon. And this would have negative social effects.

Even one of the Green Party's Member of Parliament lives in the Goethehof. His name is Peter Pilz and he has a reputation of disguising a lot of fraud and corruption in Austrian politics. So, naturally, some of his rivals bring up the issue every now and then that someone who earns more than 8,000€ a month should not live here and take cheap living quarters away from the poor. Legally, he can live here for a low rent as long as he wants (ZÖCHLING 2015).

13 Refurbishments

At the moment, the Goethehof is remodeled again and is getting new windows and doors, elevators next to every staircase, a playground for small children, and insulation. Also the rooftops are adapted to create 123 new apartments. The city invests 45 mio. € for this adaptation. And it will take four years (WINTERER 2014). The refurbishment is overdue as the building was in a bad condition of the last years.



Refurbishment of the Goethehof (work in progress, 2015) ©J. Lodemann 2015

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